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Intelligence Estimate Said To Show Need for SALT

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The nation's top intelligence officials this week are completing a grim new estimate predicting that without a Soviet-American strategic arms agreement, Soviet rockets in 1989 will be able to rain nearly 250 percent more atomic warheads on the United States than they would if constrained by SALT II and successor agreements.

The new National Intelligence Estimate—NIE 1138-79—indicates that by 1989, the Soviet could have about 14,000 highly accurate warheads mounted on their land-based missile force aimed at the United States. Under current plans, the United States would have only a fraction of this amount. By U.S. estimates, the Soviets would have about 6,000 such warheads under a SALT II treaty, which would expire in 1985 but could be extended.

These still-secret figures are the first concrete contribution to an emergency debate within the government about one consequence of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and subsequent derailing of SALT II, that has received scant public attention thus far.

This debate is prompted by the widely perceived conclusion that the United States is in danger of entering into a tense period of confrontation with the Soviet Union without a coherent or broadly supported policy of dealing with nuclear weapons.

The administration hoped it had such a policy built around the SALT II treaty and a program of new strategic arms procurement that went with it. Even before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, this policy—like the treaty—was in serious trouble, but now it appears to be on the verge of unraveling.

Senior administration officials now see a dangerous paradox—that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, potentially a threat to U.S. security, has prevented passage of a Soviet-American arms agreement that they believe clearly serves the country's security interests.

For these officials, the new National Intelligence Estimate provides proof that SALT II would put crucial constraints on a Soviet missile buildup that otherwise could threaten the survivability of the U.S. retaliatory missile force.

Several officials in the White

House, Pentagon and State Department, said in interviews in recent days that the prospect of a world without SALT—so starkly defined by the new NIE—could jolt the country and the Senate into the realization that SALT II is now more urgent than ever.

But other administration officials and numerous sources on Capitol Hill expressed the belief that the Senate could never be convinced to act favorably on SALT II this year while Soviet-American relations are tense.

While the intelligence estimate is normally classified, some government officials who support SALT are willing to discuss the broad figures privately, believing they support the case for the treaty.

SALT critics in the Senate and elsewhere reject alarmist views of the world without SALT, arguing that the Soviets will not reach the high numbers of warheads predicted in the NIE because they will not need them.

By extending the new intelligence estimate out to 1989, the intelligence officials throughout the government who prepare National Intelligence Estimates for the president cover the period in which the new U.S. super-missile, the MX, is supposed to be fully deployed.

The United States is currently planning to build 200 of these huge missiles, each carrying 10 warheads. The idea is to truck them around concrete "racetracks" in desert valleys of Utah and Nevada, hiding them at random in 4,600 concrete shelters as protection against a Soviet strike. The system is estimated to cost between \$30 billion and \$100 billion.

But the arcane arithmetic of nuclear forces that drives the arms race could change dramatically without SALT limits in force, raising questions about whether this MX project—a scheme of unprecedented cost and complexity—is the right answer.

Under SALT, government specialists estimate the Soviets could possibly aim 3,000 warheads at the MX silos, with the rest of their arsenal aimed at other U.S. missiles and military and civilian targets. About half the MX force would survive a Soviet attack, they believe, enough to still deter a Soviet strike in the first place.

But with 14,000 Soviet warheads, some 11,000 could be aimed at the MX silos, almost quadrupling the threat and calling the whole MX project, as now conceived, into question.

To maintain survival of half the MX force under an uncontrolled Soviet expansion, specialists say that the first crude estimates undertaken indicate it could mean tripling the land needed in Utah and Nevada to handle still more silos and double the cost.

It is this kind of calculation that some top civilian officials believe will have what one called "a profound and sobering impact on people's perceptions of what the realities of a world without SALT will mean."

The idea of building a budget-busting MX that might not even fulfill its mission is certain to reopen old arguments and start new one on American procurement policy.

For example, some members of Congress and administration officials are already talking privately about reviving earlier ideas for missiles that can be carried aloft and fired from airplanes. Other ideas are to move toward a new class of less expensive, more accurate missile-carrying submarines, or even to go back to the idea of installing anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defenses around existing missile silos to protect against attack. ABM's are banned by the SALT I treaty, so reverting to them would amount to "the death of arms controls," one official said.

For now President Carter has declared a policy of respecting the limits on arms contained in both the SALT I and II agreements. The Soviets' willingness to do the same, when the SALT I agreement on offensive weapons has lapsed and the SALT II treaty has not been ratified, will be tested this spring.

To continue respecting the SALT I limits, the Soviets will probably have

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